

ZYGOTE

Zygote gets out the stationery set he was given for Christmas and composes some letters to the people he feels are most in need of a good, hard kick up the bum

CASH BACK

Dear Harriet Harman,
Was that really you I spotted in Waitrose this morning, struggling to pay at the chip-and-PIN checkout? I know they have to be careful with all this hi-tech malarkey, because it's so prone to glitches and open to fraud, but honest to goodness, it's been nine long weeks since the whole Waitrose system went down and it still hasn't been fixed yet. This sort of thing must be so inconvenient for you, what with you being a busy mother as well as the Minister of State for Constitutional Affairs.

Anyway, I'm sorry we didn't have the chance to chat, because I wanted to say how pleased I was that you finally agreed with the advice I offered in my monthly column to scrap your government's e-voting proposals. E-voting! I always suspected that you were having a laugh, Harriet, especially the bit about setting up little kiosks in pubs and supermarkets, for the electorate to cast their votes in this May's local elections. But at least your e-voting projects didn't take long to end in shambles, did they? Five years, was it? Yes, it was.

By the way, did the lady at the Waitrose checkout ask if you wanted any cash back? When she

asked me, I said I'd very much like the £18m a year that the government spent on your e-voting trials, but for some reason she thought I was taking the piss. Anyway, I do hope we have time for a natter next time we bump into one another at the checkout. Love to Jack and the kids,
Zygote

GREAT SCOT

Dear Stuart Bain,
As chief executive of National Services Scotland, you must get to know all sorts of amusing characters. I love to be amused, which is why I'm writing to you about the 255 special characters your GPASS computer system can cope with. I know GPASS is the system used by 904 GPs all over Scotland, but I've only just found out about the system's ability to handle a string of text 255 characters long. This is a great technological achievement, not seen since the heady days of Sir Clive Sinclair's ZX-81.

What I particularly like about your system is the way it dumps patient records that are longer than 255 characters, not to mention the hilarious way it attaches the missing data to another patient's records. What a hoot, especially for the 102 practices that have no

paper backup of their records. Imagine the fun trying to sort out the medication for women with prostate cancer, lactating geriatrics and pregnant schoolboys.

The fact that the error in your system has been knocking around for four years speaks volumes about the role of technology in the health of the Scottish nation, and I'm sure statistics will bear me out. Keep up the good work.

Och aye,
Zygote

BUSH TELEGRAPH

Dear President George W Bush,
I was so pleased when you instructed a California court to force Google to hand over a week's worth of its search requests. Let me declare how much I agree with you when you say, "This information will help the government understand how often web users encounter material considered harmful to minors as a result of using a search engine". Let me assure you that I promise not to spill the beans about the real reason you want the data, which is to fight the American Civil Liberties Union for taking out a successful injunction against your administration, accusing you of violating the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

When Google had the audacity to say that the case against you was nothing to do with it, it proved to be a lot of nonce-loving pinkos, determined to thwart your God-given mission to protect America from child porn, terrorism and invasion by Martians.

Anyway, the reason I'm sending you this letter is that I'm a little bit worried about the legal expenses involved in your case. I think I can save you millions of dollars that can be better spent on more useful things, such as overthrowing the Chilean government or cluster-bombing Laos. There is a very fast and very cheap way to find out "how often web users encounter material considered harmful to minors as a result of using a search engine". And I am going to share my knowledge with you to help the cause.

What you do is find somebody who can use a computer and order them to log on to www.google.com. Ask Condoleezza, I expect she knows how. Then get her to type some words into the little space at the top of the screen that computer folk call the browser bar. Now just wait a couple of seconds and look at the results displayed on the screen. Yes, it's as simple as that. But please, please don't type in any naughty words yourself. After all, we don't want you to be put on an FBI file for downloading porn, do we? Start with some innocent search phrases, just to get the hang of things. For example, there are well over 3,130,000 web pages celebrating the ruggedly handsome face that you see in your very own bathroom mirror every morning. It's true, you son of a gun. Just ask Condi to type in "shaved Bush" and you'll see what I mean. Your loyal subject,
Zygote

Great Moments in Computing
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219: PIXELATION



Pixelation was first championed by author and spiritualist, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



In 1981 Atari achieved a screen resolution of 8 x 8 pixels on a cathode ray tube



But today, ultra-high resolution is in the reach of most consumers